

## INTRODUCTION

**Paul McCartney:** You know, I was talking to Neil Aspinall at Ringo's wedding, and we were remembering something that had happened years ago and he said, "Oh, I remember it exactly, it was in Piccadilly Circus, wasn't it?" I said, "No, it was Savile Row." *We had exactly the same story but the background had somehow changed.* (Giuliano and Giuliano 1995: p. 136; emphasis added)

**George Martin:** A few years ago, I was up at AIR Studios with Paul, and we were reminiscing. . . . Suddenly, we found ourselves disagreeing over a silly little detail. I said that George had done something. "No, it was Ringo," said Paul. We were both so sure of ourselves. Then we fell about laughing. "My God!" I exclaimed, *"if we can't get it right, who the hell can?"* (Martin, 1994: p. xi; emphasis added)

**Hunter Davies:** Mal [Evans] used to say that the word Sergeant Pepper came from him, his overheard mistake for Salt and Pepper.

Neil [Aspinall] tells me he was the first to suggest to Paul that the whole album should be in the form of Sergeant Pepper's actual show, and that Paul jumped at the idea. *Who can tell now?* (Davies, 1985: pp. 57–58; emphasis added)

In their own ways, the preceding examples point directly to problems inevitably encountered in the course of all historical investigation: the unreliability of memory, the partiality of authors, the status of facts. Writing more than a hundred years ago, John Baker Hopkins offered the advice that "in history, only names and dates are trustworthy, and the former are frequently corrupted and the latter are frequently wrong" (Chancellor, 1970: p. 10). Even when such mistakes are avoided or corrected, it remains notoriously difficult to approach any historical accounts with confidence. "Every perception is a construction; the simplest observation is already a theory. Facts are never neutral; they are impregnated with value judgements" (Gay, 1975: p. 195).

The positions and strategies adopted by historians in response to these observations may well be familiar; some will be referred to in what follows. But, rather than simply repeat established debates at a

theoretical level, I hope to illuminate the ideas they embody by referencing them to a specific and significant event in the recent history of popular music—the departure of Pete Best from the Beatles—which has been investigated repeatedly and explained through the use of a number of concepts whose orientation (if not terminology) draws directly from social psychology. At the same time, an awareness of those debates might help in the discovery of an appropriate orientation from which to approach this particular incident.

It is important to emphasize that my purpose is not to search for the “solution” or “truth” about Best’s dismissal from the group, or, as C. Wright Mills memorably described it, to “try to freeze some knife-edge moment” (1959: p. 168) in order to open it up for inspection. It is rather to indicate the extent to which theories of group processes and intergroup relations might persuade contemporary and future audiences to hold widely differing perceptions of a significant event in the history of the group described as “the most important single element in British popular culture of the postwar years” (Evans, 1984: p. 7).

Today’s commentaries become tomorrow’s facts—facts that may be construed in different ways, may be regarded with suspicion, may be open to revision, but facts nonetheless. The seemingly inexhaustible worldwide interest in and curiosity about the Beatles and their lives suggests that they will continue to be victims of a propensity to attract “myths and rumours, multiplying stronger than ever, around [their] scarcely imaginable, true story” (Norman, 1981: p. xvi). This tendency has been compounded by a wider historical impulse defined as “the inability to deal with the past other than as a conflict of good guys and bad” (Handlin, 1979: p. 339).

The consequences of these inclinations have been noted by Paul McCartney: “People are printing *facts* about me and John. They’re *not* facts. But it will go down in the records. It will become part of history. It will be there for always. People will believe it all” (Davies, 1985: p. 473).

The continued circulation and reproduction of so many myths about the Beatles is neither accidental nor innocent. At a period in our history when, in general terms, nostalgia has become a central component of the culture industry, the ability to re-enter the past and engage its leading figures and events demands the existence of some relatively accessible guides to what is often difficult terrain. These myths provide such a guide and, in doing so, perform important social functions. But, as Lerner warned, the past may cease to be attractive if “we tarnish it with verifiable fact” (1972: p. 246). Thus, the history of the Beatles requires not so much an excavation of the “truth” (or truths) about Pete Best’s departure as a plausible account of its significant events. Nevertheless, such accounts themselves possess their own histories, and it is to the construction and articulation of these that I will turn now.

## HISTORY, TRUTH, AND REALITY

Presented as narrative, the events surrounding Pete Best and the Beatles are not in dispute. Invited to become the Beatles' drummer in August of 1960, he left the Blackjacks to join John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Stuart Sutcliffe on their first visit to Hamburg. He stayed with the group for two years, a period that saw them fulfill three separate and lengthy residencies in Hamburg, more than 200 appearances at The Cavern in Liverpool, the appointment of Brian Epstein as their manager, the death of Stuart Sutcliffe, an unsuccessful studio audition for Decca, and a successful audition and provisional recording contract with Parlophone.

In August of 1962, just two months before the release in Britain of "Love Me Do," Brian Epstein told Best that rest of the group wanted to replace him with Ringo Starr (from Rory Storm and the Hurricanes). Within 18 months of his departure, the Beatles had become the most successful and celebrated force in international popular music—a position they are widely acknowledged to have retained to this day.

Objectively written, past events like these are part of the "very large body of agreed historical knowledge on which no dispute is possible" (Elton, 1969: p. 80). But history is more than merely what is past; "the business of the historian is to make sense of the past" (Plumb, 1969: p. 134). And it is within the attempt to make sense that the potential for uncertainty lies.

Historians like Carr have argued that, in this respect, we should jettison any faith in the absolute autonomy of history. "The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy" (Carr, 1961: p. 12). Carr's judgment is based on three inescapable characteristics of historiographic practice: the necessity for selection and interpretation; the need for some sort of contact or imaginative understanding with those about whom the historian is writing; and the fact that the historian resides not in the past but in the present, and is therefore subject to its conditions and constraints. But in making these points, Carr is not criticizing historians or diminishing their work; indeed, he sees the interpretation they bring to their studies as "the life-blood of history" (1961: p. 28), adding: "The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless" (1961: p. 30).

Carr's may be regarded as theoretical points, but more pragmatic support of the same stance has been provided by Tosh in his critical analysis of the sources from which much of what passes as historical knowledge derives. First,

such sources are incomplete, either because they have been lost or because they were never properly established. Second, they may be tainted, either through deliberate distortion or by contemporary assumptions about what is worth retaining. Third, there is sometimes a formidable profusion of sources, which can lead to confusion over issues of selection. Tosh's conclusion, too, is that "however rigorously professional the approach, there will always be a plurality of interpretation" (1984: p. 125).

In his reflections on the analysis of culture, Williams argued that these concerns combine, in practice, to create a "selective tradition," whose operation, beginning within the period itself, nominates certain activities and documents for emphasis. These become subject to our interpretations and evaluations, which are themselves likely to fluctuate over time. "A selective process of a quite drastic kind is at once evident. . . . We see this clearly enough in the case of past periods, but we never really believe it about our own" (Williams, 1961: pp. 66-67).

These and many other contributions suggest, therefore, that history—including recent and contemporary history—can be nothing more than argument, and that the circumstances of the past are literally unknowable. However, there are those who affirm that history does have a truth, albeit one that may be elusive. Principal among these is Elton, whose views "have long set the agenda for much if not all of the crucially important preliminary thinking about the question of what is history" (Jenkins, 1995: p. 3). Elton's argument is that—*notwithstanding the prejudices, the oversights, the distortions (whether deliberate or unwitting) a historian may bring to his or her assessment of past events—past events remain events which did undoubtedly occur in reality, and which are theoretically capable of investigation and comprehension.*

Thus while history is rarely able to say: this is the truth and no other answer is possible; it will always be able to say: this once existed or took place, and there is therefore a truth to be discovered if only we can find it. (Elton, 1969: p. 74)

Elton's belief that historical truths are open to discovery is promoted with even greater conviction by others: "The historian's vocation depends on this minimal operational article of faith: Truth is absolute; it is as absolute as the world is real. Truth is knowable and will out if earnestly pursued" (Handlin, 1979: p. 405).

Handlin's defense of the reality of the world is, of course, the point at which many contemporary scholars veer away from traditional parameters of debate. Dismissing both Elton's and Carr's contributions as outdated and inad-

equate, Jenkins invited us to “think of ‘the past as such’ as being an absent object of inquiry, its presence . . . being signified by its remaining traces, which is the only ‘real past’ we have” (1995: p. 17). In addition, these remaining traces—the records and archives that historians use—are themselves “highly volatile and mutable products of complex historical processes” (Jenkins, 1995: p. 17). While some kinds of “facts” may be established, the backgrounds to those facts and the contexts within which they became significant and meaningful can never be located. Therefore, “any such ‘context’ which is constructed to contextualise the facts has to be ultimately imagined or invented . . . all interpretations of the past are indeed as much invented . . . as found” (Jenkins, 1995: p. 19).

## PETE BEST AND THE BEATLES

Interpretation, imagination, and invention are presented as unavoidable traits of historiographic practice. Their impact on the ways in which past events are re-presented and subsequently comprehended can now be illustrated by concentrating on the story of Pete Best and the Beatles, the event of Best’s departure from the group, and the interpersonal and intergroup contexts within which the event has been made accountable.

At this point, it is appropriate to reflect on the fact that, during the two years Best was with the Beatles, the four young men (five, until Stuart Sutcliffe’s departure) were not just an occupational (musical) group but also an informal (social) group. An estimation of this is important, as it helps to indicate the extent to which Best was a group member rather than a mere auxiliary.

To categorise a series of individuals as being a group or not being a group is an oversimplification. The fact is that a series of individuals can vary to the extent that they constitute a group. To put it another way, some groups have more togetherness, are more unified or “groupy” than others. (Wilson, 1978: pp. 25–26)

The key to assessing the presence of this togetherness is determining the degree of interdependence among members—the extent to which “the behavior of one member influences or affects that of others and vice versa” (Wilson, 1978: p. 26). Wilson asserted that six dimensions or elements of group life must be present before a collection of individuals can properly be called a *group*.

*Interaction* is the process of mutual communication between individuals.

*Norms* are consensually agreed-upon behavioral expectations.

A *status structure* refers to behavioral expectations about certain individuals in the group, such as the leader.

A *goal* exists when there is a cooperative attempt to reach a common objective.

*Cohesiveness* is measured by the extent to which individuals want to maintain group membership.

*Awareness of membership* occurs when the individuals are clear about who is included and who is excluded from a place in the group.

"The greater the development of a group along each of these six dimensions, the higher its solidarity" (Wilson, 1978: p. 60).

The energy and commitment that surrounded the group's continuing attempts to move toward commercial and artistic success under John Lennon's leadership through the early 1960s are well-documented in the principal biographies of the Beatles (Coleman, 1984; Davies, 1985; Norman, 1981). Whereas some of the group's previous drummers (i.e., Tommy Moore, Johnny Hutchinson, and Norman Chapman) had clearly been temporary recruits, there is little doubt that Best was a valued and integral part of the Beatles. He probably performed live with the group for more hours than did Ringo Starr (Giuliano and Giuliano, 1995: p. 209), and "in many ways the Best family was inextricably involved with the group. . . . Mona Best [Pete's mother] had done a great amount of booking and management chores" (Brown and Gaines, 1983: p. 70). In fact, it was Mona Best who first contacted The Cavern on behalf of the Beatles; and it was through the Bests that Neil Aspinall, who was living at their home, became the group's road manager in 1961, staying on to become managing director at Apple, a position he still holds today.

In fact, all six elements of group solidarity appear to be more than adequately satisfied when assessing Best's two years with the Beatles. As Harry (1992) noted, "During this time, Pete had become firmly installed as a member of the group, not only on stage" (p. 91). There is little, if anything, to indicate that the composition of the Beatles at that time did not coincide exactly with the criteria presented in many social-psychological attempts to define the small group:

A group is two or more individuals in face-to-face interaction, each aware of his or her membership in the group, each aware of the others who belong to the group, and each aware of their positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals. (Johnson and Johnson, 1987: p. 8)

Best's expulsion from the Beatles in August 1962, therefore, can be seen as the departure of a full member of a recognizable and cohesive social group—

which, of course, helps to explain why, decades later, it continues to provoke such discussion and debate.

Through a consideration of historical texts—descriptive, analytical, and narrative—and biography and autobiography, several contrasting accounts of the event can be identified and grouped together in separate and competing categories of social–psychological explanation. Of course, some writers simply record the event with no further investigation or comment. In his autobiography, the group’s first manager, Alan Williams, merely reported: “[T]he Beatles—that is, John, George, Paul, and their new boss, Brian—decided that Pete Best was out and Ringo was in” (Williams and Marshall, 1975: p. 214). An equally brief view was offered by Garbarini, Cullman, and Graustark (1980) in their biography of John Lennon: “At this point, Pete Best had been unceremoniously dumped as their drummer and had been replaced by Ringo” (p. 47).

These and similar descriptions came from commentators who “are clearly compilers of alleged facts which they try to refrain from interpreting” (Mills, 1959: p. 159). While it might be argued that such descriptions are advantaged by their accuracy (in that they contain little that can be challenged), they are at the same time (and more importantly) disadvantaged by their lack of curiosity. In this way, such accounts can be seen as without purpose. They record but do not inform; they note but do not teach. But such examples are relatively uncommon; the vast majority of the literature on the Beatles at least attempts to satisfy the authors’ curiosity by incorporating explanations that, in turn, lend themselves to classification.

## 1. DEVIANCY

A group has a potent punishment for a member who persists in his deviancy despite pressures on him to shift: it may re-define its boundaries so as to exclude the deviant . . . he may be set apart so that no one talks or listens to him, he may be dropped from activities of the group, or he may be expelled. (Cartwright and Zander, 1968: p. 145)

Several authors have explained Pete Best’s expulsion in terms of personal and social incompatibility with the other Beatles. In a group distinguished by extroverted and excessive behavior, some have alleged that Best’s conservatism, as evidenced by his reluctance to engage in some central activities, was seen as deviance or nonconformity within the specific normative and behavioral environment of the Beatles. The significance of the unique social and professional environment within which creative artists reside has been well-documented. As Becker noted, “Musicians . . . believe they are under no obligation to imitate

the conventional behavior of squares. . . . Accordingly, behavior which flouts conventional social norms is greatly admired" (1963: p. 87). The expectation that members should reject certain beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in order to embrace others—almost as a condition of membership—may impose severe restrictions on the personal freedom of individual group members, but it undoubtedly results in a greater cohesiveness and likelihood of goal fulfilment.

The extent to which Best's conventionality breached this uniformity, according to some, thus created a gulf between him and the other members, which widened on every occasion when there was a discrepancy between his actions and expectations and those of the others, until the distance was too great to be recovered and expulsion became unavoidable. Paul McCartney adopted this explanation:

Pete had never quite been like the rest of us. We were the wacky trio and Pete was perhaps a little more . . . sensible; he was slightly different from us, he wasn't quite as artsy as we were. And we just didn't hang out that much together. (quoted in Lewisohn, 1988: p. 6)

McCartney's statement was a striking ratification of Becker's comment that "the musician thus views himself and his colleagues as people with a special gift which makes them different from non-musicians and not subject to their control, either in musical performance or in ordinary social behavior" (1963: p. 89).

But we must exercise caution in admitting the veracity of autobiographies or personal interviews, since it may be that "the author's purpose is less to offer an objective account than to justify his or her actions in retrospect . . . [as] a record of events they are often inaccurate and selective to the point of distortion" (Tosh, 1984: p. 32). The impulse for such distortions, if they exist, may range from the gradual acquisition of a changed set of memories and reflections over time to a deliberate attempt to mislead. In this case, however, there are several supporting conclusions from two other principal sources.

First, we find similar explanations from friends and contemporaries who were present in Liverpool in the early 1960s. In the opinion of John Lennon's close friend, Peter Shotton, "Pete never shared in the camaraderie of the others . . . the bottom line is that the Beatles were bored with Pete Best—and that, of course, was always fatal" (Shotton and Schaffner, 1983: p. 71). And according to Paddy Delaney, doorman at The Cavern, Best's dismissal was not unexpected: "It was inevitable. Pete wouldn't conform to the style Brian Epstein wanted for them. He also didn't believe in a lot of the things the boys may have been into at the time" (Baird and Giuliano, 1988: pp. 92–93).

Second, these conclusions are offered in some of the many biographies of the group and its members. Biography is endorsed by sociologists like Mills, who defined it (along with history and society) as one of “the coordinate points of the proper study of man” (1959: p. 159). But it is mistrusted by those historians who believe that history and biography possess separate rules and procedures, and that “even at its best, biography is a poor way of writing history” (Elton, 1969: p. 169). Nevertheless, since so much of the (contemporary) historical investigation of popular culture has taken the form of biography, it would be perverse to ignore what it has to say.

Thus Connolly, in a biography of John Lennon, incorporated those early Liverpool assessments into his conclusion that “many who saw the Beatles in those days have observed that Best simply seemed out of touch with the other three” (1981: p. 49). In the only authorized biography of the Beatles, Davies considered other theories, but finally resolved that “they’d never felt Pete was one of them and it was only a matter of time” (1985: p. 153). Flippo’s verdict echoed this sentiment: “[I]t was just that they wanted Pete out. They had needed a drummer to get to Hamburg and Pete had been convenient, but he had worn out his usefulness” (1988: p. 170). Clayson referred to specific examples of Best’s deviancy—including his steadfast refusal to consume amphetamines in Hamburg and his reluctance to adopt the group’s distinctive hairstyle—in explaining his belief that “his [Best’s] dismissal in August 1962 may be ascribed to an inability to conform to the mores of his peers” (1990: p. 63).

Such apparently superficial elements as these should not be hastily overlooked. As part of the symbolic, ritual aspects of behavior that characterize membership in any society, community, or group, they are immensely significant in presenting evidence of cohesion. Appearance is an especially important example of this, as Cartwright and Zander noted: “[T]he members of an adolescent group are readily identified by their distinctive style of dress . . . even among dedicated nonconformists, one finds a monotonous similarity of hair styles” (1968: p. 139). The significance the Beatles attached to conformity of appearance is clear when one recalls that one of the conditions to which Ringo Starr had to agree when he was invited to join the group was to “comb his hair forward and shave off his beard” (Norman, 1981: p. 154).

Clearly, however, reducing Best’s rejection by the other Beatles to a disagreement over physical appearance would be naive in the extreme. That disagreement is simply one manifestation of the personal and social divisions that may have existed between them and that served to differentiate Best from the others. In their references to Best’s inability to satisfy the expectations of other group members, these accounts draw directly on the archetypal definition of *labeling theory*, presented (appropriately enough) in a book that examines the

social behavior of musicians: "Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infractions constitute deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders" (Becker, 1963: p. 9). Best's failure to follow the rules and conventions developed by the other Beatles resulted in his being labeled an outsider and his disqualification from membership in the group, both socially and professionally.

## 2. CONFLICT

Whatever makes a member impressive in the eyes of others can also make him unattractive, because for members to admit his attractiveness is to admit their own inferiority. (Wilson, 1978: p. 134)

The dynamics of group membership involve a constant process of evaluation, adjustment, and comparison. High-status members (such as leaders) draw approval and recognition from those of lower status, who, in turn, rely on the high-status members for provision of scarce resources. Status consensus is present when members are in agreement over one another's positions within the group, and this naturally contributes to solidarity. The potential for solidarity weakens, however, when there is conflict over members' status.

In seeking to explain Best's departure from the Beatles, many authors have suggested that it was primarily due to internal conflict caused by the jealousy of other group members over Best's attractiveness and popularity, which gave him an enhanced status to which they objected. To be at all convincing, this interpretation requires two elements: a demonstration that Best was a popular and attractive individual, and a persuasive argument that these factors were resented by the other members.

On the first count, there seems to be complete agreement: Best was physically attractive, and people perceived this as advantageous to the Beatles. Producer George Martin's impression of Best at their first meeting in June 1962 was that "he did have the advantage of being the handsomest of the group . . . rather like James Dean" (1979: p. 123). Liverpool promoter Ron Appleby, who regularly presented the Beatles in the early 1960s, commented of Best: "He was definitely the big attraction with the group, and did much to establish their popularity during their early career" (quoted in Harry, 1992: p. 91).

In March of 1962, when the group made their first live radio recording at the Playhouse Theatre in Manchester, for the BBC radio show "Teenagers Turn," the Liverpool music paper *Mersey Beat* reported: "John, Paul and George made their entrance on stage to cheers and applause, but when Pete walked out—the

fans went wild! The girls screamed. In Manchester his popularity was assured by his looks alone" (Goldman, 1988: p. 147). And at Litherland Town Hall in Liverpool, in February of 1961, the topography of the group's stage performance had been adjusted to capitalize on Best's appeal:

His popularity grew to the extent that it was decided to place him in front of the other three. The idea of placing a drummer in front of the line-up was unprecedented . . . the stage was mobbed, and the girls surged forward and almost pulled him off. (Harry, 1992: p. 91)

In itself, such individual popularity might be seen as beneficial for the group as a whole; but if the balance of power and stability are to remain unthreatened, some sort of controls are needed. There is, for example, a body of research indicating that "physical attractiveness was positively related to acceptance, with one important exception: extremely attractive individuals tended to be rejected" (Forsyth, 1983: p. 69). Several writers have pursued the implications of this conclusion to support the second element of the conflict argument: that the Beatles deliberately ousted Pete Best because they resented his greater attractiveness.

Such contributions to history do not simply incorporate the imagination of the writer—they demand it. From a distance of several decades, these accounts can be based *only* upon observers' reports of what they *thought* they saw or heard or understood at the time. The equilibrium of critical distance and emotional empathy becomes hard to maintain. This is not to devalue such contributions, but rather to illuminate their principal features.

In the particular case of Pete Best and the Beatles, opinion again comes both from those involved at the time and from later analysts:

According to many who were present, the main reason for sacking Pete can be summed up in one word—jealousy. John, Paul, and George were extremely jealous of Pete's ability to attract girls. Too many female fans openly acknowledged Pete as the group's leader and the most handsome Beatle. (Pawlowski, 1989: p. 79)

In particular, Mona Best's explanation was unequivocal: "Pete's beat had made them. They were jealous and they wanted him out" (Davies, 1985: p. 151).

The attribution of jealousy—or, more accurately, envy—to one or more of the Beatles continued in subsequent accounts of their history. Goldman, for example, claimed:

John Lennon had resented Pete's quiet strength nearly as much as Paul McCartney was jealous of Pete's good looks. Ultimately, the balance of power in the Beatles had to be struck between John and Paul, neither of whom had any use for a third man whose appeal could not be denied or surpassed. (1988: pp. 147–148)

And Lewisohn's explanation of events included this claim: "A plan was hatching in the minds of John, Paul and George to oust him once and for all. It was based largely on jealousy. Jealousy of Pete's good looks, and the way he attracted the better girls" (1986: p. 96).

While it may be argued that these are immensely juvenile—and some would say offensively sexist—reasons for the conflict, social psychologists who study intragroup conflict have long stressed that it is the conflict itself rather than its apparent cause that is significant. Informal groups have been portrayed as "involving constant struggles and competition among members to out-perform one another on abilities of all sorts" (Wilson, 1978: p. 130). In addition, the scale of the conflict is important, as Moreland, Levine, and Wingert noted:

Moderate levels of conflict are often helpful—rivalries can motivate group members to work harder, arguments can lead group members to think about problems in more complex ways, and challenges can reveal which group members are really best at particular tasks. But higher levels of conflict are often harmful, diverting so much time and energy from work that group performance suffers. (1996: p. 17)

The momentum of these factors, then—Pete Best's popularity and the envy it provoked—led to the formation of a coalition between John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison. And coalitions are the focus of conflict with other members: "[W]ithin most informal groups, the issues that precipitate coalition formation revolve around subtle social-emotional problems of the group" (Wilson, 1978: p. 138). Lacking the individual authority to dictate the desired solution, members form a collective alliance that does possess the power to determine action.

Researchers have identified three conditions that lead to coalition formation: a belief that the coalition will be successful, an assumption among members that cooperation will lead to individual gain, and similarity along important dimensions. In the case of the Beatles, there was a striking "fit" for each condition.

By opposing three to one the continued membership of Best, the alliance of Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison contained a numerical majority that would almost certainly prove successful.

- Individually, each would gain in that he would no longer be compared unfavorably with a competitor-colleague of greater popularity.
- The similarities between the three—in terms of appearance, attitudes, and values—were emphasized even more by the mutual position of envy and resentment in which all found themselves.

The substantive outcome, with the arrival of Ringo Starr, of a more comfortable and unthreatening group environment, in which the status of each was agreed upon and assured, again accorded with the theoretical prediction. “Coalitions in most informal groups become a part of the structure because they balance the power among members and help reach some consensus about relative ranks” (Wilson, 1978: p. 139). To this end, the removal of Pete Best may have allowed for the casting of four recognizable and distinct roles within the (restructured) group, which helped to confirm and consolidate its imminent success.

### 3. INCOMPETENCE

Competent, intelligent, task-proficient people are viewed as more desirable group members than incompetents . . . individuals with high levels of competence are relatively insulated from the possibility of receiving negative evaluations from others. (Forsyth, 1983: p. 68)

Individual competence in the performance of central group activities is an essential component of continued membership in a group. In small groups faced by a specific or problem-solving task, individuals deemed to possess low task ability are not insulated from negative evaluations and may risk disqualification from the group. For example, a member of a football team whose contribution consistently falls short of team expectations will face the threat of removal. It is in the mutual interest of all that the skills performance of all should be effective.

Conformity to group norms is not, in itself, sufficient to guarantee membership; full integration of an individual into the group demands active assistance toward the realization of its goals. Neither is mere support enough, however enthusiastic that might be. “It is generally agreed that in task groups the primary basis for status and influence is contribution to the group’s task activity” (Ridgeway, 1981: p. 336).

This is the framework in which many writers have placed the story of Pete Best and the Beatles. In many ways it is the simplest of the offered explanations:

Best was dismissed because his drumming was not considered good enough, and he was replaced by someone whose ability was greater. Several of the story's leading protagonists have confirmed their role in this interpretation. George Martin, for example, stated:

I decided that Pete Best had to go. I said to Brian Epstein, "I don't care what you do with Pete Best, he is not playing on any more recording sessions. I'm getting a session drummer in, because above all these guys need a good drummer." (1994: p. 143)

Paul McCartney added to his previous reasoning by emphasizing: "I wasn't jealous of him, because he was handsome. He just couldn't play. Ringo was so much better. We wanted him out for that reason" (in Davies, 1985: p. 471).

Mike McCartney concurred: "There were quite a few drummers around Liverpool and I used to go home and tell Paul about Ringo. It was basically down to his drumming ability in the end" (quoted in Giuliano and Giuliano, 1995: p. 218).

This general estimation of Best's poor musicianship was echoed by Jackie Lomax, lead singer of a Liverpool group called the Undertakers, who was subsequently signed to Apple as a solo artist: "He could only play one drum beat, slowed up or speeded up" (quoted in Clayson, 1990: p. 76).

There is some difficulty, however, in accepting at face value these accounts, in that they contradict two of the principal tenets of a satisfactory history.

First, they are necessarily subjective. None attempts to specify the criteria by which "good" drumming can be distinguished from "poor" drumming, or to apply those criteria to the Beatles. One is left with a suspicion that such judgments are less objective analyses than reflections of personal taste.

This hesitation is increased when one considers the large number of conflicting assessments of Best's ability. For example, Liverpool promoter Sam Leach insisted, "[I]t was Pete's heavy beat that was partially responsible for the Beatles' unique sound. Pete was a lot more than a 'boom-boom drummer' sitting at the back" (1999: p. 174). And Gerry Marsden (of Gerry and the Pacemakers) said of the early Beatles: "They had Pete Best on drums and he used to drive like crazy. He was great . . . you know, this lovely driving rhythm they used to get. He was great with the band, you know. Good drummer, Pete" (quoted in Somach, Somach, and Gunn, 1989: p. 51). Such differences of opinion over past events are not to be regretted; indeed they are inevitable, since one's own perspective

can only ever be *part* of a situation that is informed by many other perspectives. Equally, they are valuable, as Tosh noted: “[T]he very subjectivity of the speaker may be the most important thing about his or her testimony” (1984: p. 181). But they are always partial.

The second problem with the competency accounts is that they are constructed and presented with the benefit of hindsight: “We know what happened next . . . the significance which we attach to a particular incident is inescapably conditioned by that knowledge” (Tosh, 1984: p. 121). So, judgments about Best’s replacement by Ringo Starr are conditioned by our knowledge that, shortly after the change, the Beatles went on to achieve unprecedented successes. We may well find a tendency, then, to infer that the two events were causally related, and that the change in the composition of the group was responsible for what followed.

Such a conclusion is reinforced by the popularity of certain perspectives within social psychology on the dynamics of group membership.

Some researchers regard group composition as a *consequence* or outcome that needs to be explained. Other researchers regard group composition as a *context* that moderates or shapes various behavioral phenomena. But most researchers regard group composition as a *cause* that can influence many other aspects of group life, including group structure, dynamics, and performance. (Moreland et al., 1996: p. 12)

This perspective promotes the view that the speed and enormity of the Beatles’ success from 1963 on are themselves clear justifications of the claim that Pete Best’s poor musicianship had restricted, and would have continued to restrict, the group’s opportunities for advancement, and equally clear proofs of the wisdom in replacing him. What such casuistry accomplishes is the elevation of theories into facts—promoting the theory that Pete Best was a weak or limited musician into an historical and logically uncontestable fact.

Had Best’s drumming appeared competent to the rest of the group, his membership would not have been threatened. But because his perceived competence—“the assistance the individual provides in helping the group to achieve favourable outcomes on its main task” (Hollander, 1976: p. 485)—was low, his status, his security, and ultimately his career in the group were undermined. And the explanation becomes still more attractive in that it invites us to see the result as ultimately fair and just: “the general idea of distributive justice is that group members with greater perceived investments, such as competence, are entitled to more behavioral outcomes than group members with lower perceived investments” (Wilke, 1996: p. 76).

## 4. STATUS LIABILITY

As long as there is still hope of achieving the group goal, the group will bear with him because of (a) his past performance, and (b) their future need of his services. However, if his behavior interferes to the degree that the group's goal is jeopardised, the members will punish him. (Wiggins, Dill, and Schwartz, 1965: p. 198)

According to Hollander's theory of idiosyncrasy credits (Hollander, 1958, 1976), group members secure and maintain their membership by demonstrations of competence and conformity, which bring them symbolic "credits," which can then be exchanged for status. In other words, an efficient contribution to the achievement of the group's goals and a commitment to its norms and values should, under normal circumstances, guarantee membership. Any deviations from these norms or lapses in performance will be covered by the stock of credits the member has acquired. Minor infringements lead to a relatively small drain on these symbolic resources; more serious infringements result in a greater depletion. But as the satisfactory routine enactments of daily membership are adding directly and continuously to each person's credit account, any single transgression is unlikely to have major consequences for established members.

However, the possibility always exists that a single deviant act may occur of such proportions that it threatens the attainment of the group's goal, or its very existence. Such an act bankrupts the individual's stock of credits immediately and irrevocably and, "by definition, affiliation with the group—as perceived by the group—ceases when the individual's credit balance reaches zero" (Hollander, 1958: p. 121). This phenomenon is referred to as *status liability*.

The sudden and unexpected nature of Best's removal persuaded many that it had not been preplanned or anticipated. The fact that it came just two weeks after Parlophone's decision to offer the group a recording contract added to the conviction that—at such a time of celebration and success—it could not have reflected any long-term dissatisfaction with his performance.

There had to be another reason; thus, Pete Best's departure from the Beatles has been construed by some as an immediate reaction by the rest of the group to an unstated transgression, whose wider circulation would have so severely jeopardized the group's ability to reach its goal that the only possible solution was his dismissal. Understandably, none of the accounts offer details of the behavior, other than to hint at its existence. Mellers pointed to the "slightly dubious circumstances" (1973: p. 189) of Best's exit, while Lewisohn referred to "so-called 'insiders' privy to the group [who] claim . . . that they know other, more salacious, reasons" (1986: p. 97). Others questioned the "official" version of-

ferred by Brian Epstein, which spoke of musical and personal differences: "I must say in all fairness to Best that his own version and the versions I subsequently heard from other people close to the Bests at the time are at slight variance with the account of Epstein's" (Tremlett, 1975: p. 46).

Only Coleman's description of a meeting over dinner, shortly after Best's departure, between Epstein, Ted Knibbs (the manager of Billy J. Kramer), and local promoter/music writer Bob Wooler, referred directly to anything more, although again the details are absent:

Reminding Epstein of his journalistic interests [Wooler] suddenly announced: "I am going to tell the *true* Pete Best story." There was a pregnant silence. "You can't do *that*," Epstein said. Wooler and Epstein's declamations implied that there was more to the sacking of Best than had been admitted. Wooler was defiant. "I *am* going to do it." Red-faced and fuming with fury, Epstein repeated: "You can't do that. You just can't." (Coleman, 1989: pp. 125–126)

The fact that this account is constructed like a passage in a novel, even to the inclusion of remembered or invented dialogue, does not necessarily render it inadmissible as an historical document. The combination of evidence and supposition—of fact and fiction—*is* an intellectual process familiar in literature and poetry and is a legitimate device in history. As Plumb noted, "History . . . requires imagination, creativity and empathy, as well as observation as accurate as a scholar can make it" (1969: p. 12). If, as has been suggested, "all history is interpretive and never literally true" (Jenkins, 1995: p. 23), then the passage—which clearly cannot be literally true—is not exceptional, but a typical example of the ways writers manipulate the traces of the past to create histories.

In this case, the history created is the assertion that the full circumstances of Best's rejection by the Beatles have not yet been revealed. It implies there must have been a specific cause—an incident or series of events—that has remained concealed for years, and that the more familiar accounts of his departure gained currency because of their expediency rather than their accuracy. And its conclusion is that the behavior—or the public knowledge of such—was perceived to be so extreme or damaging in its consequences that his credit rating within the group was immediately exhausted and his membership curtailed.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is not my objective here to identify the "correct" theory of Best's departure—or even the most plausible of a limited number of alternative explanations. How-

ever, it is relevant to note that each of the foregoing sets of theories has been rejected by Pete Best himself.

He continues to ridicule the suggestion that his conventional behavior isolated him from three more unconventional group members: "What they mean by 'conventional,' God only knows. If they say, 'he wouldn't act the goat as much as the rest of them,' then they've got to be joking! Conventionality went out the window!" (Best, 1995).

Similarly, he sees no logic in the notion that his dismissal was the result of conflict that stemmed from the others' jealousy: "I know my mother thinks they were jealous of me, but I don't think it was that. We had a group sound. It wasn't just one person" (in Davies, 1985: p. 30).

Best has strenuously refuted the suggestion that he was an unsuitable or incompetent drummer: "Never to my face, during my two years as a Beatle, did one of them declare that my drumming was not up to standard" (Best and Doncaster, 1985: p. 174).

And he has always denied knowledge of any factors that may have made his membership a liability or risk to the group's success: "As far as I'm concerned, there was no build-up to it . . . it would have been nice if I'd been in the position to defend myself . . . it would have been nice to have had them there and actually ask the reasons why" (Giuliano and Giuliano, 1995: p. 208).

Just as the most enthusiastic advocacies of a theory do not guarantee its accuracy, so a denial does not necessarily undermine the right of that theory to be examined seriously. Implicit in that examination, however, must be an awareness that the practice of oral history—the first-hand recollections of people interviewed by a writer or researcher—presents major difficulties. In particular, as Tosh noted:

[I]t is naive to suppose that the testimony represents a pure distillation of past experience, for in an interview each party is affected by the other. The presence of an outsider affects the atmosphere in which the informant recalls the past and talks about it. (1984: p. 178)

When those interviewed are among the most celebrated representatives of popular culture, whose faces, voices, and apparent histories are familiar to audiences around the world, these differences are magnified. The explicit presence of the interviewer and the implied presence of huge numbers of attentive and enthusiastic fans can do nothing but distort the reliability of recollection.

Those not acquainted with historical research may well question how there can be so many conflicting accounts of a singular, relatively recent event, and further wonder whether this “renders all the history supposedly known a matter of private choice and interpretation, so that in the end there is nothing but subjective opinion, the very opposite to truth” (Elton, 1969: p. 70). At one level, this questioning is correct. The past does not survive in a form that allows for our complete understanding; furthermore, our knowledge of it is constantly refined and modified as new records, new evidence, and new voices come to our attention.

To the question, “What is the true story of Pete Best and the Beatles?” the answer must be that it does not exist. And it is unlikely ever to exist, because contemporary re-creation of the past is impossible and all accounts of the past inherently rely on interpretation, imagination, and invention. To study this particular moment in the history of popular culture through the theoretical lens of social psychology is simply to provide an example of the problems of historical assignments. There are many other examples, both within popular music (the death of Elvis Presley—murder, accident, suicide, or faked), and outside it (the assassination of President Kennedy and the death of Princess Diana), wherein the explanations routinely offered are characterized by comparable disagreements and uncertainties.

Furthermore, the members of the Beatles themselves have demonstrated a general reluctance to offer consistent or comprehensive accounts of several of the significant events and periods in their lives. In particular, their self-produced *Anthology* documentary series (1995) revealed a clutch of conspicuous absences—“mainly biographical and career matters: the firing of Pete Best, the Beatles’ use of drugs, their legal battles with each other” (Burns, 2000: p. 184)—which might suggest that the narratives created by the familiar stories of Pete Best serve to perpetuate a history that is at least tolerated by the remaining group members.

Two final observations, applicable to historical research in general, may be of particular value to attempts to record and comprehend the narratives of popular culture. The first is the recognition that “historical writing of all kinds is determined as much by what it leaves out as by what it puts in” (Tosh, 1984: p. 113). The second is the advice given by Carr: “Study the historian before you begin to study the facts” (1961: p. 23).

Attempts to arrive at conclusions about Pete Best and the Beatles within the context of the group’s interpersonal dynamics demonstrate with unusual clarity the importance of attending to both of these requirements.

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